The Nature of God

IS THERE A PLACE IN RELIGION FOR THE SUPERNATURAL?

●

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THE NATURE OF GOD

A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

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* It is suggested that these sermons are most important for the development of the theme.

Is There a Place in Religion for the Supernatural?

● The discussion of the relationship of the supernatural to religion, of course, involves the problem of the relationship between religion and science. There is no necessary quarrel between the two, but as anyone knows, there has always been such a struggle and strife. I said there was no necessary relationship of quarreling, and, yet, one must admit, in all fairness, that as religion has been taught and according to the basic principles of knowledge and procedure common to religion, there is very good reason for science to quarrel with religion; and, of course, the same thing applies, for religion wanting to quarrel with science.

When this began, I do not know. I would like to have a clearer knowledge of the history of it. It seems that in the early days of our history and the history of religion, science, in its naive and unconscious state, was allowed to proceed on its own way. Religion and science ran more or less parallel paths, without either one quite understanding the implications of its own propositions or those of the other; and with only rare instances of one venturing to take its knowledge and cross the boundary line to apply it to the findings of the other study. But there was bound to be a growing correlation of these two sources of information, shall we say, concerning our world; and this crossing over from one realm to the other became more and more common.

I think it would be fair to say that science reached self-consciousness, or adolescence, or maturity, however you want to put it — no, we could not say maturity, because it was the first time that its principles were really formulated — about the Sixteenth Century. Wouldn't you agree that, probably, Bacon would take a place at the beginning of self-conscious science; and Galileo, at about the same time, is the outstanding dramatic example of the conflict between these two branches of life which has gone on in increasing bitterness and intensity from that time.

In the first fourteen centuries or so of our Christian history, we were concerned almost entirely with inter-church matters; the nature of Jesus, the relationship of Jesus to God and the Holy Spirit and the Trinity, the kind of things that a Christian should or should not do in Society, and the relationship of the Church to the State.

From that Sixteenth Century on, our quarrels became more public, and we were then set up against this growing scientific method. You remember that Galileo discovered some things through his telescope that the Church did not want to see — not so much that they did not want to see them because they could have looked without trouble, but it was the question of the interpretation of the things that were seen. It is always a matter of interpretation, not experience. I want very much that you should remember that. We very rarely ever quarrel with basic experience. It is the interpretation of that experience that causes trouble and, of course, that interpretation is exceedingly important.

● So, from that point on, there was this growing trouble. It came when men started to investigate the nature of the body through analysis of the body, a little branching off from the idea regnant until then that religion could tell you all you needed to know about Man and his world. The scientists began to make discoveries that did not quite fit in with religion, and there was more trouble. Then some men of scientific training and bent began to apply the procedures and rules they had learned to Biblical material itself, and there was a great horror in the religious world because the authority of the Bible was being taken away.

Then came the discovery of the relationship of Man to his universe in an evolutionary theory and thesis; and with that, the quarrel entered its most modern phase. In this connection it is interesting to note that the vast majority of Christian people have not yet come to terms with those discoveries, or should I say more accurately, with those theories well-substantiated by scientific method.

Now we are at a new phase in this whole struggle, and it is an important phase, for it sums up the entire history of the quarrel. It is the struggle between naturalism and supernaturalism. Our problem, which we are only now in a position to appreciate, or at a time in which we can begin to approach it seriously, is as follows: Is religion going to be concerned with something that lies beyond and above Nature, or is religion going to subject itself from here on to the dictates of this method called scientific, and to the results in particular studies achieved by men calling themselves scientists? Is religion a natural world affair, or is it a supernatural thing? You see, that sums up the whole struggle, and I dare say that you, as yet, have seldom heard it put forth in that bald form. It is just now beginning,

and I venture to prophesy — and I prophesy seldom — that this will be the fighting line of religion for some generations to come. You are in on the beginning of it, and you should be aware of the place you occupy in this historical succession. You should also know where this naturalism and supernaturalism came from. This may be a little aside from the point of the morning, and yet, I feel that it is important for our growing understanding and increasing depth of study in this series.

You will remember very well, of course, the quarrel between religion and humanism, and this Church had a large part in that quarrel. It was also a quarrel between supernaturalism and humanism, because religion, as then known, was entirely supernatural. Humanism came along to say: "This emphasis is all wrong. These things you say cannot be substantiated. In fact, most of the things you say can be disproven. Now, if that is what religion is, we are through with it." So the humanists began to build up a religion of their own centered entirely within the things that they could see and experience and feel, tested and proven statements within the limits and along the lines of the scientific method; and there was the split.

Now we discovered soon after that, and many of you have gone through this stage, that humanism lacked something that religion had always had. It seemed to be without a central core of strength and body. It was a good influence and emphasis, but lacking somehow or other in sustaining power, lacking in incentive, lacking in principle sufficient to carry one through the struggles and turmoils of a world that was not getting daily better and better, but, in fact, was moving into a period of calamity unexperienced before in the history of Mankind. With that growing calamity and horror, humanism began to lose its influence.

● The supernaturalists, on the other hand, had also learned something. They had learned that they should not now make propositions that could be subject to the ravages and impact of these scientists. They ought not "to stick their necks out," to put it in modern slang, because their heads would be cut off. Learning from that experience, they withdrew into themselves; not that they brought it down into the world, but rather that they took it up out of the world even more than it had been. They created a new realm for themselves, and in modern parlance, that is now known as the "new supernaturalism." I am saying this because the question may enter into your minds, and you ought to know that there is that development and change, but,

basically, supernaturalism and the new supernaturalism are the same thing.

Humanism, too, has changed, and those tough-minded men who wanted nothing to do with this supernatural business, who still maintained that the humanists had had a sound approach and vision, began to deepen and develop that approach. They did not stop with mortality and things that were good, but went down below that to see what it was in the nature of things that made these rules good; what it was that made such and such a thing good. That process and that type of approach we have named "naturalism." Now we are ready to proceed with our discussion.

● What is supernaturalism in simple terms or in formal definition? The formal definition will be more important because you already have your own notion in simple terms. Here is a statement from one of the modern leading exponents. "There is a spiritual, metaphysical order superior to external Nature, above all the mechanisms and laws of the material world. This order is no part of the universe. It rises above the creative world, the sensible and the supersensible." There it is in clear, bald form. The supernatural is something that is above and beyond any of the experiences or any of the material or data of this world that we can possibly discover! Not merely above and beyond what we now know, but above and beyond what any man, at any time, will ever be able to discover! It is a new realm, a new structure, and no knowledge, no experience, no rules, no principles and no morality that apply here have anything whatever to do with that other world. I have not stated this in exaggerated form. That is exactly the position adopted.

What is this supernaturalism in more specific, descriptive form? There are these three things that I want you to remember about it. First of all, it is a belief in two different worlds, the natural world and the supernatural world, remembering, as I have already said, that what applies in the one, the natural, does not apply in the supernatural; and remembering that the transition between these two worlds is always from the supernatural to the natural. You cannot rise from the natural to knowledge of the supernatural, because they are distinctly separated realms. There is no ladder of Jacob ascending from the one to the other.

The second fact is that there are two ways of knowing in religions that give allegiance to this kind of belief. There are two ways of knowing, and this is most important. It is the

crux of the whole thing; and was the major reason for that sermon last week on the place of reason in religion. If we live in this world, there ought to be definite ways of achieving knowledge and truth; and the scientists are those who have developed those ways. They are not inventions; they are the discoveries of countless generations of men working on the problem of how to know themselves and their world better. Out of that crucible of experience has come certain rules and procedures, and that is what we call our way of knowing, the rational way, the scientific method.

Another modern writer has called it practical reason. It is the experimental method; it is the empirical method. There are all sorts of names for it, but you know it as tested knowledge, as that way which produces statements that can be proven by reference back to experience by any man willing to undergo the necessary conditions of the experiment. That is the way of knowledge. It is the most sure and tested information we have.

The Supernaturalists say, "Why, yes, that is fine. That is the way you learn about things *here*, but when it comes to things of another realm, in the other world, this method that you have adopted will not work." Knowledge then becomes a matter of revelation, divine insight, intuition, mystical experience, all names for the same kind of thing. All of these methods of knowing are, in themselves, absolute. There is no way to question revelation because if you could question it, that would mean it was not revelation. Revelation is the Word of God given to you. Then who is Man to question the Word of God? So, while you may adopt this one way of knowing in this world for these things, that is unimportant when it comes to higher matters. So there is this second way of knowing, or I should say, there are these other ways.

● You see what that means? It means that Man is somehow or other a diverse personality, and that what he learns here, and what he has tested and proven to be the best that he can arrive at, given the body that he has been given and the world in which he lives, all that is of no account when he comes to the supernatural, spiritual world. One might well say: "It is the same man, isn't it? It is the same world, isn't it? And this knowledge, however it may be of another world, is still known by this man in this world, isn't it? Then if he is capable of establishing truth other than by this scientific method, does that not mean that contradictory statements may each be proven true by different

methods?" Thus we are left in confusion with no way of resolving the conflict.

The third point to remember is this. Supernaturalism places credence and faith in the transcendental way of knowing. Faith in the transcendental, means that whenever there is a conflict between the things that you feel, that you intuit, that you sense, that you have an emotion about, or that is revealed to you, that is to take precedence over all knowledge and learning acquired by any scientific method.

● Thus you see the whole conflict that arose through having the Church make pronouncements concerning the nature of Man and historical events, only to have them disproven as this worldly method developed and new data were brought in. The new supernaturalism has avoided this problem by saying nothing concerning this world, but making all their pronouncements consist of statements about the other world where the scientific method cannot intrude. You see it is the ultimate of the retreat from growing knowledge when you take all your statements entirely out of the world so that they can be neither confirmed nor denied.

Now, then, some of the evils of this supernaturalism. First of all, one must admit there is a very great evil in denying the validity of our most surely tested knowledge because as soon as you cast doubt upon that by saying that there are other ways of knowing things, you have immediately brought under suspicion the greater bulk of the knowledge by which we live. And you will find, sooner or later, that while it will not affect the rightness or the justice and truth of the things we discover here, more and more people will begin to disregard this knowledge, and so bring themselves to destruction through the discredit of reason. Secondly, this method produces illogical, contradictory, and sometimes ridiculous statements. We have already noted that if there are various ways of establishing truth and no commonly accepted standard for reconciling these views, there is no way of avoiding the claim that contradictories are true. The usual equivalent to this is the assertion by the church or religious person of some statement that we know is not justified by our knowledge in other fields. It is this sort of conflict that has driven so many of our better minds from the church and religion.

A third evil is that Supernaturalism precludes cooperative action. And this is most important. Unless men can agree on the way in which they are going to work; unless men can agree that such and such tests will be the determination of the truth,

they have no way of bringing together their individual discoveries. They have no way of cooperating or combining to merge their forces to achieve a better world. There is no possibility of creative inter-action, and it is only through this sort of process that we have brought our life to whatever level it may now be on. Unless men can speak the same language or a common language, there can be little or no inter-communication.

So in religion, intellectual, or spiritual life, unless we can find a common language, a common decision as to what we shall accept as evidence, as to what we shall accept as legitimate in the way of establishing truth, we shall not be able to work with other people who disagree with us. That is why I made the statement last week that in our present state, we cannot even begin to discuss matters with these people called the fundamentalists. We do not talk the same language. There is no beginning point at all. We disagree on how Man knows, and disagreeing on that, we cannot come to any agreement on the specific things that he does know.

Fourth, supernaturalism produces bigotry, intolerance and persecution. You remember that I had occasion last week also to say that the thing that supernaturalism or fundamentalism had in common with fascism and communism was repudiation of reason. That was not an idle statement. These three elements or forces in modern life have the same kind of approach. It is an approach through persecution and intolerance and bigotry. Under such influence, one does not stop to argue with people or to discuss things with them because there is no possibility of being wrong.

How are two people who disagree to get together on any one proposition? There are only two ways. One way is to persuade one another by reference to fact and experience concerning the relative truth or merit of one or the other of the propositions. You do this by accepting some common standard of approach, and by subjecting your relative claims to experimentation. Thus, you may discover that one or the other was right or that there was something between or higher than the two that was better than either.

● Now, if you have that door closed to you, what other way do you have of extending your viewpoint to others who may disagree with you? There is only one way.' You must use force. That is why the Church has so very often in its history gone to the lengths of persecuting people who did not agree with it. That is why we have been intolerant. There was no way in

which we could unbend to examine the wisdom of the things we believed or the wisdom of those who disagreed with us. There was no way in which we could have been wrong; and because we believed so intensely, because it was a revelation of God, we were given all that emotional driving force to persecute and torture people so that they would accept this "God-given knowledge."

● The season for this sort of thing is not past and gone with the Middle Ages. You know very well — don't we all — that fascism and communism have adopted this method because it is the only way open to them, and made rather extensive and thorough use of it. You ought to know that the Church, too, is not yet beyond intolerance, bigotry, and persecution. There are signs aplenty in the world today that that method is again being used, and will be used, if and when the proper occasion comes.

Another thing is that supernaturalism leads to a lack of concern for this world and for its morality, remembering that any morality you may have or develop in this world has no relevancy to the other world. You do not get to the other world by being good here. In fact, you do not know what is good here. Of course you can build up your moral and ethical systems, and you may call some of them religious or Christian, but they have nothing to do with that other world. They are different and apart, and you cannot ever establish a plan as to how you should act religiously in any particular situation. That is a true statement of this position. You must rely, in every instance, upon the revelation of God, upon what God will tell you in that particular moment; and there is no carry-over from that moment to another one. Neither can you assemble these different moments and derive from them a common principle applicable to all such moments.

As a result of this kind of approach, men have found "salvation," are finding "salvation," and are being indifferent to the way in which they live here. I wonder if that is the reason why so many of the most pious, righteous people are the worst type of citizen. There is some kind of relationship here. I have seen it too often, and you have too, not to feel that the fault must lie in the philosophy of religion. There are many striking examples and illustrations one could produce that I shall not. When a man's religion is something apart from the way in which he lives here; when a man's religion has nothing whatever to do with the things that we know are good here, then he is

well on the way to becoming the kind of hypocrite that so many church people are.

When you divorce religion from this life, you develop a lack of interest in this life and in its rules, and, as yet, the Kingdom of God has not come upon earth! But when it does come upon earth, surely it will be upon the principles that Mankind has discovered to be good principles for life upon earth! The only kind of a religion that is suitable for us today is a religion that grows up out of that kind of information and knowledge.

Now, then, what is this other thing called naturalism? I am going to read you a statement of that similar to the one I read concerning supernaturalism. "Naturalism means a philosophical position, (Do not let these words bother you,) empirical in method, (That is scientific in method) that regards everything that exists or occurs to be conditioned in its existence or occurrence by causal factors within one all-encompassing system of nature, however spiritual or purposeful or rational some of these events and things may in their functions and values prove to be."

Now you get the contrast there. It takes its stand, on the fact that anything that happens or occurs here in this life is conditioned and occasioned by some other material event or happening. Now, some of those events and happenings may be of such nature that you call them spiritual, but they are still events occasioned and conditioned by other events within this life; and there is no radical distinction or incongruity between material and spiritual.

Now, let us proceed to describe Naturalism. First of all, it asserts that there is one world. There *is* one world. We know nothing of any other world than this. We have no concern with any other world than this one. Other worlds or realms there may be but all that we know now may be understood within the one all-encompassing system of Nature.

● Secondly, there is only one way of knowing, or rather more accurately, one way of testing statements for their truth. We will not admit the validity of "private truth". Truth, whether it be about "spiritual" or "material" things must be established in the same way. Thirdly, of course, we place our faith in this one way of knowing, the scientific method, and we place our faith in it in spite of the fact that it never gives absolute knowledge and does not always give unquestioned truth. It is not always right. It does not always give us the right knowledge or information. It is very often wrong, but it is self-corrective

and anyone who pursues this method will never stay in error long, or forever, because sooner or later more information will bring cleaner, clearer and better truth.

● Let us now list some of the advantages of the "Naturalistic" approach. First of all, it gives us certain (not absolute) knowledge. We know what we know because we can test it and prove it. You must know and understand that when you begin to talk about things that are outside this world, they can neither be proven nor disproven. And when something is of that sort, you might just as well eliminate it from your life. It should have no real importance to you. For instance, you talk about the Will of Providence. Now, if the Will of Providence is anything real we should be able to derive from it tests that would prove its realness and its goodness, but there are none such because when things go wrong, it is the Will of Providence! When things go right, it is still the Will of Providence! You have added the same term to both sides of the equation, and you have changed the equation not at all! It is the same way when people pray asking for things from God, and then when they do not get what they want, they explain it all by saying, "Well, God's Will be done". You see the loophole in that insofar as no matter what happens, it is still God's will, meaning that what happens, logically, cannot be ascribed to the goodness of God or to your prayer, because if it does not happen, you still say that it is the Will of God. In other words there is no evidence to prove that things would have been any different, if you had not prayed at all.

This Naturalism then gives us access to tested, certain knowledge about the things of this world, and it is not a knowledge that can be eliminated or overlooked.

Secondly, it makes possible creative, cooperative action. You and I agree on how we are going to proceed. We agree on what it is that constitutes truth. We agree on the method of confirming or establishing truth. We do not in any way limit the insights or intuitions that you may have or want to have. You may get them through divine flashes, by hard work or by day-dreaming, by visions or through voices. You may get these insights in any way you want to, but we will not accept them as true until we have subjected them to this common test that we have both agreed upon! By that means, diverse personalities of widely different interests and backgrounds can at least work creatively and cooperatively together because they have a common method of approach.

Thirdly, it relates religion to this world. Now I do not know whether there is any other world or not, and no man does. It cannot be proven, and it cannot be disproven. Since it can neither be proven or disproven, we agree to eliminate it. We agree to make religion something that is concerned with our life here and now, and we look for the best that we can find, and we say somehow or other that best must have something to do with religion. We have brought it down at last out of the sky and clouds to this life and its gleaming realities.

Fourth, this naturalistic method preserves the heart and core and strength of religion as it has always been known. Remember, I said it was not a matter of experience; it was a matter of interpretation. By this naturalistic method, we agree that we never know everything about anything. You will remember last week we talked about the super-rational, that which was beyond and above what we could explore with our reason. We do not begin or presume to say that reason is the end of everything. Take the most common object you can, the chair you are now sitting in. Your reason will only approach it and point it out. It will not give you the experience of sitting in it! How much more so concerning God. All your reason can do is sift the various emotions and ideas and feelings that you have and find out which is true, logical, and which can be substantiated, and by that means, it gradually points you over here to something that you say is God; but it only points! You have got to experience Him yourself! Reason will not be your experience of Him! It may help you to find Him!

We should understand that the Naturalistic approach does not attempt to reduce life to the purely rational. All down below our minds is reality; and we know almost nothing about it. The headlights of our car are pointing out the path, but all around the outside of that little light is darkness; and that is life. There is great richness and beauty there, and there is all the value in the world if only we could enlarge the scope of our knowledge, and deepen our experience and appreciation. Someday we know that we shall.

● The last value of this method is that it will enlist the better minds of our day in the search and the quest; and we need them! It is sickening to me, as it must be to you, to see the lack of interest in our society in spiritual matters, even in those who go to church, and then to realize in addition that this group is only a small percentage of our population. You know that something must be wrong with the people or with religion if that should

be so; and you know that it has been the fault of both! A religion that has been concerned with another world has no right to expect the allegiance of people who are living in this world! A religion that denies the best tested knowledge of Mankind has no right to expect the interest of men who built their civilization upon their reasoning and their science! A religion that dismisses morality, rules and principles as unimportant has no right to expect allegiance and devotion from men living in this world; and it has not been getting it!

● So the Church has been going on its way, proud in its own conceits, never thinking to stop to test its own knowledge, and its own approach; condemning always the men who didn't come because they did not come. It may be, and I am sure it is, that a good deal of the right is with the people, with those who have not been going to church. There is good reason for it. They did not want to have their intelligence insulted, and they were not willing to give up the best that they knew for ethereal talk of something good in another realm when there was no connection between them. It is because of this growing chasm between the church and the people that the Church has been so ineffective, and that you, as individuals, have been so spiritually inept. You cannot go on without building a religion around or on the things that you know are good. It is not enough to say that the church is wrong and leave it. If it is wrong, then the things that you treasure in life as good should be exalted by you and the meaning and significance of them discovered. You have got to justify and explore the riches of the thing that you believe in! If these things you believe in are good, why are they good? How are they good? If they are good, you owe more duty to them. You ought to be serving them more than you do. You ought to know more about them than you do. That is always the task of religion. When a man begins to explore the possibilities and basis of the things he knows are good, he is religious.

Now it is time that you came back into the Church, and it is time that the Church came down out of its other world into this world so that you intelligent people, you men who have minds trained to meet the problems of life should now begin to turn some of that power and ability of yours to these questions that are most important and vital — these spiritual matters. You can build great civilizations, but you know that that is not enough. You have untold sources of power, but you know that that is not enough. Until, and unless, we begin to discover more of the nature of the goodness of Man and of that upon

which Society must be built, we shall go on using our power and strength to destroy ourselves!

We can use you, use everything that you have got! Here is an enterprise that is intellectually respectable! We may not always be sure of what we say. We may not always have absolute knowledge. We will never have absolute knowledge. But anything that we say in this new Church that is coming will be open to your criticism and to your deeper knowledge and deeper insight. Have you something to contribute to this growth? Have you insights better and deeper? Have you access to knowledge that will be helpful? Then why don't you come and give it to us and to yourself and to your society? Here is a chance for the best of all of us to get together, and in creative, cooperative, interaction bring about more of God in our world. The need is urgent. Time is running out. We need you, and you need us. The only hope for our Church and for our world is that men of good-will will get together and work together to bring it about.

● There is an old legend I want to give you. There was a small family of a man and a wife and a little child, a toddler. They went off to a country fair for one of their rare days of enjoyment. On the way, they had to go through a rather thickly overgrown woods. The parents went swinging along absorbed in themselves but when they came out at the other end of the woods, and turned to find their child he had disappeared. They went back to look for him, and they looked and they looked; and they could not find him. Then becoming anxious, they went into the country fair and gathered all their friends about them, and brought them out to help them find their child that was lost. So they all began to beat the forest, but they, too, failed to find him. Then one man said, "Well, now, let us go to the end of the woods, and we'll string out; and we'll join hands as much as we can and walk down through the woods. In that way, we will know we have covered everything." And that they did. It was not long before they found the youngster, but it was too late. 'My God', cried the father, 'Why didn't we join hands sooner'!"